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FM AMEMBASSY RIYADH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3185
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH 7918
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 RIYADH 008723

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NEA FOR GORDON GRAY AND ALAN MISENHEIMER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/06/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [KISL](#) [KWMN](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: RIYADH RECORD: OCTOBER 16-31 (C-NE6-01865)

REF: A. A) RIYADH 8414
 B. B) RIYADH 6472
 C. C) RIYADH 6730

Classified By: Political Counselor David Rundell
for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Iraqi religious leaders signed the Makkah Declaration on October 20, which forbids Sunnis and Shi'a from killing each other. King Abdullah issued a new succession law on October 20, which formalizes the succession process through the establishment of the Allegiance Committee. Public discussion about this new law is generally positive, and the Shoura Council praised the King's efforts in its most recent meeting. A 160-signatory petition supported the Ministry of Culture and Information in the wake of a recent online campaign by Islamic conservatives calling for the dismissal of the Minister of Information and several other ministry officials. The debate about the court-enforced annulment of a happily married couple due to "tribal incompatibility" has resurfaced, and there is speculation that the Ministry of Justice will review the decision. END SUMMARY.

Makkah Declaration Aims to Prevent Sectarian Violence

¶2. (C) Iraqi Sunni and Shi'a religious leaders signed on October 20 the "Makkah Declaration," which forbids Sunnis and Shi'a to kill each other. In addition to calling for a "complete end" to sectarian killing, the Declaration also condemns "takfiri" thought and provides that houses of worship are "sacrosanct" -- to include mosques and non-Muslim places of worship. Many regional players took part in the conference, and Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) Secretary General Akmaluddin Ihsanoglu indicated that a

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committee would be set up to support the implementation of the Declaration. (COMMENT: Although the Saudi public and press generally welcomed the Makkah Declaration as a step in the right direction and commended the SAG for its leadership in bringing Iraq's religious leaders to the table, a distinct undercurrent of caution remains evident. Additionally, the low profile of the Shi'a representatives, including their relative importance in the Iraqi religious community, has resulted in some criticism that the Shi'a have not taken this effort as seriously as the Sunnis. END COMMENT.) (Ref A).

New Succession Law Formalizes Selection Process, Shoura Council and Opposition Group Comment

13. (S) King Abdullah issued a new succession law on Friday October 20 that created a mechanism called the Allegiance Committee to formalize the transfer of power in Saudi Arabia. This Committee is composed exclusively of male heirs of King Abdul Aziz bin Al Saud, and through secret ballot voting, it has the power to approve the king's choice for a crown prince or reject his proposal and come up with its own. It can also declare a sitting monarch incapable of performing his duties for medical reasons. The new law becomes effective when Crown Prince Sultan becomes King; however, it is a major step in King Abdullah's push for reform because it distributes a key power of the king-- selecting future leadership -- to an entire group of princes. The new law may also be an indication of the increasing ineffectiveness of the informal, secretive Saudi Family Council previously responsible for

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advising the king on matters of succession, as well as increasing competition among the branches of royal family.

14. (S) The London-based opposition group Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia (MIRA) issued a statement on its website on October 21 regarding the new succession law announced by King Abdullah on October 20. The statement reported that one of King Abdullah's sons leaked information to MIRA about the circumstances under which this law was established. The statement contended that: (1) King Abdullah created the succession law without collaborating with some of his senior brothers; (2) the main objective of the law is to exclude Minister of Interior Prince Naif bin Abdul Aziz, who is seen by many as generally uncooperative with the King and critical of some of the U.S. policies; (3) King Abdullah expects Crown Prince Sultan to die before him, therefore this law allows King Abdullah to appoint one of his sons as Crown Prince; and (4) King Abdullah seeks to refute the continuous claims about internal royal family disputes. Additionally, MIRA leader Saad al-Faqih gave a 60-minute public address on

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October 30 that included a reiteration of the above statement. (NOTE: MIRA's last public statements were made in August when it called for Kingdom-wide protests against the SAG. These protests were reportedly unsuccessful, but it was the first time that MIRA publicly appeared since its UN designations as a supporter of terrorism. (Ref B). END NOTE.)

15. (U) Shoura Council Chairman and Grand Mufti of the Grand Mosque in Makkah Dr. Salih bin Abdullah bin Humaid gave an interview on the new succession law on October 23 to the mainstream Arabic-language Saudi newspaper "Okaz." He highlighted the significant role that this law plays in the ongoing push for reform instituted by King Abdullah, and stated that its consistency with Islamic law ensures its solid foundation in the Kingdom's future. He stated, "The system, with its coherent articles that are based on the Qu'ran and His Prophet's Sunna (deeds and sayings), gives more stability to the rule and smoothes the authority exchange, which will lead to completing the constitutional project." He further stated, "Therefore, it aims at serving the interests of the people and establishing the national unity and the constants of rule." (COMMENT: Homaid's statements lay the foundation for consensus between religious leaders and the royal family on this issue. However, the extremist website "Sahat" posted on October 29 some statements criticizing the new law for excluding religious scholars in the selection of the monarchy. END COMMENT.)

Shoura Council Congratulates King, Apologizes for
Non-Participation in Doha Meeting

16. (U) The Shoura Council held an extraordinary session on October 29 following the Eid al-Fitr holiday. During the

meeting, the Council congratulated the King on the Eid holiday and for the efforts made by the SAG to ease travel for Umrah pilgrims and other travelers to Makkah and Medina during Ramadan and Eid. The Council also congratulated the King on the issuance of the new succession law and the establishment of the Allegiance Committee, stating that "the Allegiance Committee system is a step further in the process of political reforms initiated by King Abdullah and his Crown Prince." Mainstream media also reported that the Shoura Council apologized for not accepting the invitation to the United Nations-sponsored Democracies and Wise Leadership Conference scheduled for October 29. There was no indication as to the reason.

Conflict Between Ministry of Culture and Information and
Islamic Conservatives

¶7. (C) During the Eid holiday, the Ministry of Culture and Information received a petition signed by 160 reform-minded male and female scholars supporting Minister of Information Iyad bin Amin Madany. The petition was also posted on a liberal Saudi-based website "Al-Hurreyah." The petition followed a recent Internet campaign by Islamic conservatives criticizing many of the Ministry's programs as being "un-Islamic" and demanding the dismissal of the Minister and several other ministry officials. A campaign supporter publicly stated that the Ministry tends to "exclude Islamic thoughts" from its liberal and secular programming. The petition harshly criticized this Internet campaign against the Ministry, calling it "intellectual terrorism." The petition supported the Minister and highlighted the successes achieved during his tenure, specifically noting increased openness in the media and cultural awareness in the society. The statement also commended the Minister for his efforts to align Saudi Arabia's cultural norms with those in the "free world." While commenting that there is a need for public criticism, the statement's authors accused the Islamic conservatives of criticizing the Government as a means to preserve their radical ideologies and not to serve the national interest or common good. They also advocated for the prosecution of those behind the campaign, claiming that it aimed to hinder the development of Saudi Arabia and falsely exploit religion. (COMMENT: That the petition was posted online and the source of much debate in the mainstream media is an example of the progress in expanding media accessibility and openness that the Ministry of Information has made recently under the guidance of King Abdullah's push for reform. Although Islamic conservatives who represent a majority of Saudi society will most likely continue to oppose many of the Ministry's programs, the public support for the

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Ministry demonstrates the positive difference that its programs are making generally in Saudi society. END
COMMENT.) (septel).

Tribal Allegiance in Divorce Case Resurfaces

¶8. (C) A Saudi couple in Al-Jouf, a city in the northern part of the Kingdom, had their marriage forcibly annulled in mid-August on the grounds that it violated social customs. The Shari'a court ruled in favor of the half-brother, who petitioned the court for the annulment because he claimed that his sister was from a noble tribe and should not be married to a non-tribal man (Ref C). Despite robust public debate from religious conservatives and reform-minded scholars following the ruling, the decision has remained final. The case resurfaced on October 28 on the extremist website "Sahat" after a lawyer in the case claimed that the Minister of Justice is reconsidering the case based upon legal inconsistencies that occurred during the proceedings. The newspaper "Okaz" published an editorial on the case the

same week, arguing that this ruling violated basic Islamic principles and should be revisited. (COMMENT: The resurgence of debate on this case reveals the continued strong influence of tribal norms and customs in Saudi society. END COMMENT.)

VIP VISITS

19. (U) Throughout this period, King Abdullah received numerous visits, phone calls, cables, and letters congratulating him on the celebration of the Eid al-Fitr holiday. King Abdullah was briefed by Palestinian Authority President Abbas via telephone on October 23 about the latest developments in the Palestinian territories. King Abdullah discussed bilateral relations and regional issues with French President Chirac via telephone on October 23. Saudi Minister of Interior Prince Naif and General Intelligence Presidency Prince Muqrin met with the Secretary General of the Commission of the Iraqi Muslim Scholars Sheikh Harith al-Dhari on October 23 to discuss recent developments in Iraq and reiterated Saudi Arabia's commitment to enhance security and stability in Iraq.
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